

Message: A Call for Courage

What does courage look like? Brooke Sisko knows.

“During her sophomore year in college, she had a class called Comparative Religions. Brooke took the class thinking she was going to learn about other religions. It turned out to be very different from what she expected.

First of all, they sat in a circle. Then, the teacher would throw out questions for discussion. They were to answer the question in a way that supports the specific religion they believe in. Fearful how others might respond, Brooke always slouched in her desk. She wasn't alone in her fears. The whole room usually seemed uncomfortably silent.

One day, the teacher asked a question that shook Brooke up:

‘Why does God let a child molester get away with his actions, but a 6-month-old baby dies of cancer?’ Suddenly the class was no longer so silent - this question started a huge discussion. Most of the answers went something like this:

‘Maybe God is trying to get revenge on us for our sins.’

‘I think God wants us to be Buddhist because they believe in happiness.’

Brooke looked at two other Christians in her class, realizing they were too afraid to speak up. Her heart started pounding as she glanced nervously at the other students. Some of them probably thought they were too cool to answer. Out of nowhere Brooke heard her voice saying, ‘I don't believe any of that.’

All heads turned toward her. She contemplated not explaining herself as her teacher just looked at her. Brook knew she was risking becoming ‘that Christian freak.’ But suddenly, she felt the courage to continue.

‘I don't think God chose to have the world filled with evil, but Satan and humans have shaped the world into the way it now is.’

‘What about the baby? Shouldn't God have ordered one of his heavenly angels to come save it?’ her teacher asked, waving his arms dramatically.

Brooke answered cautiously, trying not to anger the teacher. ‘To be honest, I don't have an answer, but I know God doesn't enjoy the pain we experience. And he doesn't enjoy it when people get away with doing wrong things. I don't really know how to explain, but God didn't make the world this way. It's broken by sin, so maybe the question should be stated differently. I don't think we can judge God on the evil of this world. Instead, I just have faith he is in control and will one day right the wrongs.’

Brooke said, ‘As the teacher glared at me and moved on to a different question, I felt a rush of happiness. I had a sense that God was proud of what I had just done, and that he was smiling over the courage and the faith I showed in this tough moment.’”¹

Sometimes we don't know the answer. It takes courage to admit that and to tell others why we are in a relationship with God, a relationship based on trust.

Have courage and trust in God. That's what our first reading from Joshua 5:9-12 is about. It's a lesson that definitely applies today. Let's spend a few minutes looking at the passage in more depth. When I read it, I have a lot of questions. Maybe you have some of the same questions. When we look for the answers, God reveals important things to us. The way people experienced God in Joshua's time guides us in our experience of God today.

Who is Joshua? (ref. Ex. 24:13, Numbers 14:29-31, Joshua 1:1)
Joshua is the son of Nun. Joshua is Moses' assistant, a much younger man. He was with Moses when the people left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. Joshua went up the mountain with Moses to wait for the Lord to give them the commandments. Joshua and Caleb were the only two who had been in Canaan before – 40 years earlier, when the people's fear won over their faith.

God gave Joshua a clear message and call: *“Be strong and fearless because you are the one who will bring the Israelites to the land I swore to them. I myself will be with you”* (Deuteronomy 31:23, CEB).

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ivff/faithandlife/mylifeasastudent/afraid-to-speak-up.html>

The Lord had Moses commission Joshua before Eleazer the priest and all the people – they knew who the leader was, and they followed him wholly and completely (Numbers 27:19).

God gives the people the same message – three times!!

“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9; plus vv 6,7). God goes ahead and prepares the way. God protects us and will give us success as long as we follow God’s will (v7). That’s powerful encouragement to people who felt left out, left behind, with no place to call home with low self-esteem, self-confidence, feeling like they have little value. They have hope, not just seemingly empty promises from God and their leaders. That was true in Joshua’s day and it’s true today as well.

Where is Gilgal? Joshua tells us. It’s a place on the eastern border of Jericho on the plains. It’s where the people set up twelve stones – one for each tribe, as a memorial to those that went before and for what God had done for them. The stones came from the bed of the river Jordan after the Lord parted the waters so the people could cross over to the land God had promised to them. This was a reminder of the parting of the Red Sea and fulfillment of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

It’s good to remember those who have gone before: the good and the bad, the ways they were faithful to God and the times when they went their own way. We can respect and remember what God did for them, while we follow God to new places and ways of living.

What disgrace is the Lord removing? During the 40 years the people were living in the desert, their culture changed. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, everyone over the age of 20 who left Egypt and complained about God died (Numbers 14:29-30). These were people who did not listen to the voice of the Lord (Joshua 5:6).

But a marvelous, natural thing happened. Children grew up, married and had children of their own in the 40 years that passed. That’s who Joshua was leading: the children and grandchildren. There’s only one thing: they had not made a commitment to God. There was no covenant relationship between the new generation and the Lord.

Their parents had turned away from God in fear. A lifetime of slavery took it’s toll. They lost the will, desire and, eventually, the knowledge to teach their children what it means to follow God wholly and completely. They lost their trust in God.

We, too, may be unable to trust God because we are enslaved by chains and limitations of our own making. Sadly some turn away from God. When that happens, we often end up complaining when God doesn’t just give us what we want and feel we deserve. If we aren’t careful, we end up like the Israelites. They lost the ability to teach their children the ways of God, in other words, how to experience God and be in relationship with God.

It was up to Joshua then and, today, new, young leaders to call the people to commit to the Lord. Living in tents far from buildings and structures, camped out on the plains of Jericho, the new generation believed. Even though unsure and vulnerable, they had faith. And they made a commitment to be in a relationship with God, to follow where God would lead them, in their own way and time. Doing so, they shed the disgrace of their parents.

The word disgrace can also be translated as disappointment or shame. God isn’t a god of guilt and shame. God is a God of caring, forgiveness, pardon and healing. God called the people to be strong and courageous so they could put their fears and limitations aside and trust God to protect and guide them, even when they were feeling vulnerable and unsure. God rolls shame, guilt and disappointment away when we are courageous and willing to be in a lifelong relationship with God.

What’s manna? It’s food God provided for the people for 40 years! Day in and day out, God provided food for the people. All of their needs were met. They had food, water and a place to live. They had family. The Lord watched over them. Their days were ordered. As former slaves, they needed a master to watch over them, provide for every need and tell them what to do. Manna is a sign of God’s grace and care for those who can’t care for themselves.

Why are unleavened bread and roasted grain important? They are food harvested by the next generation. They had the courage to cross

the waters, make a commitment to God and then rest. They remembered what God had done for their families, so they celebrated Passover. Today, we celebrate Holy Week and Easter in the same way.

We also celebrate the day after, when the food they ate was put on the table with their own hands. They were able to care for themselves. They went into the fields to harvest what God provided so they could eat. No one had to tell them to do so. This was a new way. The people broke the chain of dependency. They weren't slaves any longer, waiting for the master to provide for all of their needs. That's what God wants: people who will love, worship and share God's love with others, freely and willingly; people who will go into the harvest fields to labor.

Jesus affirmed God's desire. He said, *“I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you”* (John 15:15).

What does this mean today? There are a lot of layers and many implications to this pivotal narrative in the history of humanity experience of God. Let me offer a few concluding thoughts:

- ***God will raise up young leaders.*** Trust in God is needed, as is the commissioning and support of the people without reservation.
- ***Each generation makes their own covenant with God.*** The things that changed our lives when we were young are hard to remember. Giving younger generations the environment, time and support they need to embrace God in their own way. That's how we can pass on God's blessing.
- ***Following God takes courage.*** There are times when we'll feel overwhelmed, vulnerable and exposed. But, if we hold onto our faith and trust God, good will always be done.
- ***God will protect and provide, but God wants us to get involved.*** If we want to sit on the sidelines, there's a place for us. We'll always be welcome. But we will find ourselves in the camp of those who need God to do everything. To truly embrace what God wants to give

to us, we need to get involved. We need to boldly share our faith and then take action.

Have courage! Trust God. Do all you can to strengthen your relationship with Jesus. Then you’ll live a life worth living.

Let us pray ...

O God, you are wise and understanding. You know we are unsure, afraid of the discord and challenges of living in the real world. We confess there are days when we would prefer to be served and cared for, instead of standing up with courage and internal strength. Thank you for reminding us to have courage, as Joshua and the people did. Thank you for not being a God of shame and guilt, but a God of forgiveness, grace and mercy. Give us the strength to trust you in everything, particularly in those areas we don’t understand. We lift up our families and the generations to come. Guide them in true faith and love. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Joshua 5:9-12 (CEB)

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” So the place was called Gilgal, as it is today.

The Israelites camped in Gilgal. They celebrated Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the plains of Jericho. On the very next day after Passover, they ate food produced in the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped on that next day, when they ate food produced in the land. There was no longer any manna for the Israelites. So that year they ate the crops of the land of Canaan.

Luke 15:1-10, (11b-32) (CEB)

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

“Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won’t light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”